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ABSTRACT

Career academies are schools within schools that link students with peers, teachers, and community partners in a disciplined environment, thereby fostering academic success and mental and emotional health. The career academy concept includes the following three key elements: (1) small learning communities; (2) a college preparatory curriculum with a career theme; and (3) partnerships with employers, community, and higher education. The following are among the essential components within those three areas: (1) a team of teachers who have joined the program by choice; (2) voluntary enrollment by students who are allowed to focus on a discipline of their choice; (3) academic courses that meet high school graduation and college entrance requirements; (4) common planning time for the teaching team; (5) counseling to ensure that students have postsecondary plans; (6) employers providing mentoring and job shadowing; (7) a steering committee of community partners to oversee academy operations; and (8) parental support of students' enrollment in the academy. According to a 5-year evaluation of 1,900 students and 9 career academies, career academies reduced dropout rates for at-risk students by nearly one-third, were associated with higher rates of college attendance, and provided at-risk youth with opportunities to set goals and reach academic and professional objectives that may have been otherwise unattainable. (MN)

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**U.S. Department of Justice**
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OJJDP FACT SHEET
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# The Career Academy Concept

By Joseph N. Coffee and Scott Pestridge

It has long been known that some students do not perform well in traditional school settings. In the Bulletins *Combating Fear and Restoring Safety in Schools* (Arnette and Walsleben, 1998) and *Reaching Out to Youth Out of the Education Mainstream* (Ingersoll and LeBoeuf, 1997), the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) encouraged the establishment of partnership academies, schools within schools, and school-to-work programs as part of a comprehensive strategy to meet the educational needs of these students and provide them with alternatives to delinquency.

Career academies are schools within schools that link students with peers, teachers, and community partners in a disciplined environment, fostering academic success and mental and emotional health. Originally created to help inner-city students stay in school and obtain meaningful occupational experience, career academies and similar programs have evolved into a multifaceted, integrated approach to reducing delinquent behavior and enhancing protective factors among at-risk youth. Career academies allow youth who may have trouble fitting into the larger school environment to belong to a smaller educational community and to connect what they learn in school with their career aspirations and goals. Career academies provide at-risk youth with an alternative to joining gangs and offer these youth an opportunity to become assets to their communities.

## Key Elements

The career academy concept has three key elements (Stern, Dayton, and Raby, 1998):

**A small learning community.** Career academies are organized as small learning communities in which students traditionally stay with a core group of teachers over the 3 or 4 years they are in high school. National organizations supporting career academies agree that these small learning communities should include the following components:

- Several classes or disciplines offered solely to academy students in grades 9–12 or 10–12.
- A team of teachers (with a lead teacher/coordinator) who have joined the program by choice.
- Voluntary enrollment by students who are allowed to focus on a discipline of their choice.
- Opportunities for students to engage in a full range of elective and nonacademy courses and other school activities.

**College preparatory curriculum with a career theme.** Career academies combine academic and vocational curriculums into an integrated career theme (e.g., health, public safety, engineering, finance). The combined curriculums include the following:

- Academic courses that meet high school graduation and college entrance requirements.
- Common planning time for the teaching team.
- Projects that bring together skills acquired from academic and career classes.
- Counseling to ensure the student has a postsecondary plan.

**Partnerships with employers, community, and higher education.** Career academies establish partnerships with local employers to build stronger connections between school and work, providing students with a range of career development and work-based learning opportunities. Academies also establish partnerships with community organizations, parents, and higher education institutions. Essential components of these partnerships include the following:

- Employers provide mentoring and job shadowing (i.e., opportunities for students to observe employees at work) in career fields.
- Community partners develop a steering committee to oversee academy operations within a selected career field.
- Parents support a student's decision to enroll in an academy and also participate in academy activities.
- Institutions of higher education give students college credit for completion of course work.

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## A Promising Program

The Criminal Justice Academy is one of five career academies at Walbrook High School in Baltimore, MD. A 4-year, citywide comprehensive educational program, the academy partners with the Baltimore City Police Department, Greater Walbrook Communities, and the Baltimore City Public School System to provide students with a rigorous academic program that qualifies them for higher education and/or a career in criminal justice. Students learn basic skills and receive prerequisite training for careers in law enforcement. Academy graduates who elect to attend the Baltimore City Community College and major in criminal justice receive up to 15 college credits for completed academy courses. In spring 2000, 49 students graduated from the Criminal Justice Academy. Seventy percent of the graduates went on to study at an institution of higher education.

## Career Academies and At-Risk Youth

Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation has conducted a 5-year evaluation of career academies, covering 9 academies and 1,900 students. The evaluation report (Kemple and Snipes, 2000) documents the following findings:

- Career academies reduced dropout rates by nearly one-third for at-risk students (those identified as least likely to do well in a traditional school environment).
- Students enrolled in career academies attended high school more consistently, completed more academic and vocational courses, and were more likely to apply to college than their counterparts who were not enrolled in academies.
- Career academies provide at-risk youth opportunities to set goals and reach academic and professional objectives that may have otherwise been unobtainable.

## For Further Information

In spring 2000, OJJDP helped to create a support group to provide technical assistance to law enforcement agencies, school systems, and other community agencies interested in developing and improving local career academies. For information on technical assistance and other aspects of career academies, contact Joseph N. Coffee, Executive Director, National Partnership for Careers in Public Safety and Security, 901 North Pitt Street, Suite 320, Alexandria, VA 22314; 703–836–4880 (ext. 20); jcoffee@napehq.org (e-mail).

For information on Walbrook High School's Criminal Justice Academy, contact Sergeant Yolanda Whiting, Director, Walbrook High School Criminal Justice Academy, 2000 Edgewood Street, Baltimore, MD 21216; 410–396–2004; ywhiting@usa.net (e-mail).

## References


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*The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.*

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